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Narration:

In the late 1990s, the Balkan region of Kosovo experienced some of the worst ethnic violence in its history. The international community responded in 1999, forcing Slobodan Milosevic and his forces out of Kosovo. Now, eight years after the end of the Kosovo conflict, the diplomatic initiative to determine Kosovo's final status has reached its decisive stage.

Stay tuned as we discuss Kosovo's political process, hear from top U.S. officials of the issue, and explore ways that schools and youth contribute to community rebuilding.

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Narration:

After more than a year of negotiations, the United Nations-led political process to determine the final status of Kosovo is nearing its conclusion. On April 3, the United Nations Special Envoy for Kosovo, former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari presented his report to the UN Security Council. Among his recommendations for Kosovo's future is that Kosovo should become independent after an initial period of international supervision.

Kosovo was designated an autonomous province under the 1974 Yugoslavia constitution. It had its own legislature and seat on the Federal Presidency. But in 1989, the Milosevic regime suspended that autonomy, and began a brutal crackdown resulting in violent clashes between Serbs and Albanians in 1998. Ethnic cleansing campaigns were carried out against ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, creating a humanitarian crisis. Approximately 10,000 individuals were killed and 1 million were forced from their homes.

In March of 1999, the world responded. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or NATO, began a brief air campaign aimed at stopping the violence. Following the military intervention, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1244 to regulate the post conflict situation. The resolution established a United Nations-led interim administration in Kosovo until the territory's status is resolved.

Yugoslav armed forces were ordered to withdraw from Kosovo, and a NATO-led peace-keeping coalition known as the Kosovo Force, or KFOR stepped in. Elections for a Kosovar assembly were first held in 2001, resulting in the appointment of a President and Prime Minister. Although ethnic violence in 2004 disrupted the reconciliation process, efforts to stabilize the region and implement reforms on good governance, rule of law and multi-ethnicity have recently progressed. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan appointed President Ahtisaari as Special Envoy in late 2005 to lead the UN-led Kosovo status talks.

The report proposed by Mr. Ahtisaari is the product of over a year of discussions between the parties. It addresses a range of issues such as decentralization, protection of religious

and cultural heritage, and economics. The recommendations reflect the guiding principles of the “Contact Group”, an informal grouping of countries that first came together in response to the crisis in Bosnia. The group, which includes France, Germany, Italy, Russia, the U.K., and the U.S., consults regularly with the United Nations, European Union, and other organizations.

With the presentation of the final status proposal to the United Nations Security Council, the political process has now entered its final and decisive stage. U.S. officials support the UN Special Envoy’s proposals. The proposals contain far-reaching guarantees to protect the rights and security of Kosovo Serbs and other non-Albanian communities. U.S. officials also believe the proposals will give the people of Kosovo clarity about their future for the first time in many years and help enhance regional stability.

Overcoming the past, and looking to the future. A program for high school students called ACCESS does just that. Serbian and Albanian students get together after school with an American teacher for English lessons and discussion about the issues most important to Kosovo’s young people.

The ACCESS program is active in over 45 countries and last year selected around 10,000 students for enrollment. In Kosovo, American embassy staff have volunteered as teachers, and talked with students about their experiences and American culture.

ACCESS activities include dances, ski trips, sports, and other activities. Students have the chance to be informal in a safe and open environment – and develop friendships that serve as building blocks for a tolerant and multiethnic Kosovo.

For more information on U.S. government exchange and education programs, visit exchanges.state.gov.

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The Kosovo future status process involves diplomacy at the highest levels of government. Senior U.S. officials meet regularly with their European, Russian, and United Nations counterparts as the process moves ahead. Despite the progress that has already been made, there are many issues that remain as diplomatic discussions continue.

U.S. diplomacy on Kosovo is led by Under Secretary for Political Affairs R. Nicholas Burns, and Assistant Secretary for European Affairs Daniel Fried. Mr. Fried recently returned from the region in Mid March, and gave his thoughts on Serb communities in Kosovo:

Clip 1:

My overwhelming impression in Kosovo is first that the Kosovo Serbs, who may not like this process, who wish they were in a different situation altogether, are determined for the most part to stay in Kosovo after the status process is concluded. They want to live in peace, in security, but they want to live in Kosovo. I did not hear the mayors talk about

mass exodus. I did not hear threats of violence. I did not hear demands and threats of disruption.

What I did hear was a great deal of concern about the future, a desire for clarity, a desire for an international presence in Kosovo beyond the status process, and from a great many Kosovo Serbs I had -- I heard strong impression -- expressions of support for KFOR and for what KFOR is doing to protect them.

Narration:

Mr. Fried also talked about U.S. hopes for Serbia's future as part of the European and transatlantic communities:

Clip 2:

"In Belgrade, my message -- my public message to the Serbs was that the United States in particular, but also the transatlantic community in general, wants to see Serbia as part of our common family and part of our common institutions. Whatever the final outcome on Kosovo, we do not want to see a Europe whole, free and at peace with Serbia as an exception. We want to see Serbia as part of this Europe whole, free and at peace."

Narration:

Under Secretary Burns spoke with reporters in Brussels, Belgium, on March 27th following meetings with NATO colleagues. He confirmed U.S. support for a strong European lead in Kosovo's status process:

Clip 3:

"I think what is very important, what a lot of my colleagues said today, the European colleagues, a number of them said this is a problem that Europe will have to live with and a reality that Europe will have to live with. So the European voice here should be very strong in determining what happens at the Security Council.

Kosovo will be part of Europe. It will have in the future a relationship with the EU as well as NATO, we hope. So it's going to be very important that the Europeans speak up strongly and that the Europeans are able to convince others who perhaps have not played the role economically and militarily that Europe and the United States have played, that this European voice should be listened to."

Narration:

Mr. Burns also talked about the United Nations proposal:

Clip 4:

"The Serb government will have to decide what it is going to do and what its position is, but ultimately this is up to the Security Council. It's up to the international community to move forward. Resolution 1244 of June '99 essentially relieved Serbia of the responsibility for governance in Kosovo and it gave that authority to the United Nations. Now the suggestion is that that authority should be transferred to the people of Kosovo,

that they should be able to form their own government and they should be able to be sovereign in their country.

So we do support this proposal. We support independence for Kosovo. We support the Attasari proposal for a supervised independence, a period of time. It doesn't surprise me at all that Serbia is opposed to this. We've known that for a very long time. But it also doesn't change our position.

I think you'll see us want to talk with the Serbian government about how we can cooperate on other issues and how we can make sure that relationship stays intact and stays together as we move forward."

Narrator:

If you wish to learn more about Kosovo and U.S. diplomacy in Europe, visit the U.S. State Department's Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs at State.gov.

You can view the UN Commission's recommendations on the website of the UN Mission to Kosovo at unmikonline.org

And you can learn about efforts to build institutions, democracy, and the rule of law at the OSCE's Kosovo page at osce.org/kosovo.

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